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IT MAY BE that the Reagan administration is readying a packet of anti-leak laws, seeking to curb once and for all the favorite pastime of official Washington.

William J. Casey, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, hinted as much in a speech on national security before a meeting of the American Society of Newspaper Editors. Noting that President Ronald Reagan has been trying to crack down on government employees who leak information to the press, he said: "We have increased our efforts to uncover those who violate this trust. We are studying whether new laws are needed to deal with federal employees who decide on their own to disclose classified information."

That may or may not be an indication that the administration has concluded that the spy statutes used recently in an unprecedented way to prosecute Samuel Loring Morison, a former naval intelligence analyst who leaked information to a British publication, are not the answer to the administration's problem. Justice Department officials have pointed out that the spy statutes, as used in the Morison case, could apply equally to reporters receiving the leaks as well as to the leaker, although they have hastened to add that there is no intention of using them against the press.

Whether any new legislation would skirt the issue of press responsibility in publishing unauthorized leaks is anybody's guess. But it would be surprising, given the emphasis that this administration has placed on secrecy, if there wasn't something contained in any proposed laws that did not strike the press as an attempt to curtail its freedom to print information that it believes the public should know and that does not jeopardize lives or the national interest.

Howard Simons, the former managing editor of The Washington

Post and presently curator of the Nieman Foundation, summed up the present loggerhead at which the administration and the press now stand. The issue, he told the editors, "is not just national security. It is the nation and what constitutes security. It is not just the press. It is the freedom of the press. It is not just government secrets. It is secret government."

This administration's obsession with secrecy continues without letup. Casey was almost conciliatory in his remarks to the editors, but he nevertheless made accusations that, if true, would cause editors to think about routinely submitting governmental stories to the CIA before publishing them.

Publication of classified information has destroyed or seriously damaged intelligence sources and methods of the highest value, he said, costing billions of dollars in wasted talent and effort and jeopardizing lives.

Nevertheless, he respected the right and resourcefulness of the press in getting information to the public, although he wished for more "cooperation" and an "allowance for dialogue."

Yet the press has cooperated repeatedly, as Simons pointed out — and Casey himself agrees — in withholding some stories at the government's request, while printing others. So what is the issue?

Casey says he could prove his point but doesn't dare because to do so would only cause more damage. Yet on occasion he has engaged in the same circular reasoning with not just press people but senior administration officials. Take my word for it, he says, leaks are doing horrendous damage. But the press insists on the right to judge for itself.

Reagan himself brought up the matter of leaks and national security in his appearance before the editors. In any military operation, he seemed to be saying, the need for secrecy had to prevail over any considerations of allowing

reporters to be present during hostilities. Referring to the Grenada invasion, he said: "... You must understand where we believe that there is an operation, that where secrecy is so all important, that you give us the right to protect ourselves against a leak of information," which, he conceded, probably would come from his own White House.

At the same time, he said he was unaware that, by a deliberate decision of the Navy, reporters had been removed from one of the Sixth Fleet ships involved in the Libyan confrontation after recent hostilities broke out.

What does all this say? It seems to say that the tradition of American reporters being present when American troops go into battle situations has been altered considerably, and that the reason is leaks — any post-Grenada agreements on pool coverage notwithstanding. Yet in all the wars such operations have been secret and the press has always honored the need for secrecy. It further says that secrecy is being used as an excuse for ensuring that the public will only get its information about American troops in combat from the government. /■